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New horizons in developing communication students' text-production competence

Daniel Dejica-Cartis *

Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, "Politehnica" University of Timişoara, Str. T. Lalescu, Timişoara, 300223, Romania

Abstract

This paper is part of a wider theory-building research which aims at facilitating text understanding and text production for communication students at Bachelor level. The approach presented here comes to complement existing text-production strategies in the specialized literature and is based on the application of four strategies which use different relational perspectives (syntactic, semantic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive) in the production of texts. The suggested approach can help communication students (1) produce texts to suit different types of audience, (2) make consistent decisions as to the use of salient textual properties, (3) stress or focus on desired or relevant information and (4) preserve coherence and cohesion so as to facilitate text understanding.

Keywords: Text production, text perspectives, relational analysis, communication competence;

1. Introduction

One of the common competencies for translation and professional communication students is represented by the ability to analyze and understand texts for various purposes. This shared ground helps translation students produce translations, and communication students, different types of texts or professional genres. The present paper uses existing text analysis strategies and presents an approach which is suggested to be used for the development of communication students' text production skills. In the first part of the paper, a theory of text perspective is presented, and in the second part, an approach for text production is exemplified from different relational perspectives (syntactic, semantic, lexico-grammatical, and cognitive). It is shown how the application of this approach offers communication students a way of (1) producing texts which can suit different types of audience, (2) making consistent decisions as to the use of salient textual properties, (3) stressing or focusing on desired or relevant information and (4) preserving coherence and cohesion so as to facilitate text understanding.

2. A theory of text perspectives

In two recent papers, Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2006, 2008) suggests that texts should be analysed from at least three perspectives: (1) a perspective that views only individual components of a text put together to form the structure of a text, e.g. words like Lego components which form a structure or system; (2) a perspective that takes

* Daniel Dejica-Cartis. Tel.: +4-0256-40.40.11
E-mail address: daniel.dejica@cls.upt.ro

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the individual components further into the text and looks at their informational strings or semantic clusters; and (3) a perspective which looks at holistic 'Gestalt' phenomena, implied background knowledge, cultural attitudes and values in a text (Gerzymisch-Arbogast, 2006). These perspectives, referred to as *atomistic, hol-atomistic and holistic* (Gerzymisch-Arbogast, 2008), would provide translators with an overall understanding of the texts to be translated and help them produce coherent target texts:

> "While this differentiation may initially seem (and is) complex – after all, translation is a complex activity – it allows practicing translators to focus on translation problems from varying perspectives, e.g. from the perspectives of terms (atomistic level), from the perspective of information sequencing (hol-atomistic level) and/or from the perspective of background knowledge (holistic level), and at the same time integrate these complementary perspectives into a consistent methodology to produce a coherent target text." (Gerzymisch-Arbogast, 2008: 11-12)

The present paper uses this terminology, builds on the approach of text perspectives and extends it to the production of texts from a hol-atomistic perspective. From this perspective, various relational patterns are presented and suggested to be used for developing students' text production competence.

3. Developing text production competence

Existing studies (Dejica, 2008a) have shown that hol-atomistic relational analyses can facilitate text understanding in terms of particular textual structures, discourse styles, lexical choices, etc. It is the contention of this paper that a prerequisite for developing text production competence is the students' familiarity with text analysis procedures or strategies. That is why the suggested strategies for text production are presented here in relation with those used for text analysis. Also, these text-production strategies are suggested to be taught only after having developed students' text analysis competence. In practice, since text production is influenced among other things by the intention of the text producer and the purpose of the text itself, these strategies should be applied in the pre-writing stage of the writing process. In this way, the text producer's decisions will be transparent, consistent, and in line with the writing assignment. The strategies exemplified here are (1) creation of the syntactic holon of the text, (2) production of semantic relations, (3) creation of lexical and grammatical holons, and (4) creation of information frames. All the strategies suggested here will be exemplified and discussed using the 'Ptolemy Project Objectives' example, an excerpt selected from a project proposal:

> Ptolemy Project Objectives
> The project aims to develop techniques supporting heterogeneous modeling, including both formal "meta-models" and a software laboratory for experimenting with heterogeneous modeling. In this context, it will explore methods based on dataflow and process networks, discrete-event systems, synchronous/reactive languages, finite-state machines, and communicating sequential processes. It will make contributions ranging from fundamental semantics to synthesis of embedded software and custom hardware.
> (Ptolemy Project, http://ptolemy.eecs.berkeley.edu/)

3.1. Creation of the syntactic holon of the text

The notion of syntactic holon has been introduced and used in text analysis studies (Dejica, 2008b), and it reveals the text author's preferences for a particular sentence construction or word order at text level. A precondition of using syntactic holons in the process of text production is students' familiarity with existing typical sentence structures. Ballard (2001: 119) presents extensively various clause and sentence structures in English. The examples of basic sentence structures in Table 1 follow Ballard's classifications.

There are many other structural variations (extraposition, clefting, fronting, end-shift, etc.) which may involve the change in position of a sentence element or the removal of an item from its normal position in the sentence with the aim of placing greater or constant emphasis on a specific item of information at sentence or text-level, but their presentation would exceed the scope of this paper.

Table 1. Basic sentence structure in English

Sentence Structure	Example			
S V	*Paul*	*Fell*		
S V O	*Paul*	*broke*	*his ankle*	
S V O_i O_d	*Andrew*	*Bought*	*Cathy*	*a sports car*
S V C_s	*Sue*	*was feeling*	*very sleepy*	
S V O C_o	*Chris*	*made*	*Sara*	*really angry*
S V A	*A drunk*	*was leaning*	*against the wall*	
S V O A	*Terry*	*put*	*the rubbish*	*in the dustbin*

At sentence level, the Ptolemy Project example is based on the most frequent syntactic pattern in the English language: S + V + O. At text level, these recurrent structures create the following syntactic holon:

S + V + O
S + V + O
S + V + O

Figure 1. Exemplification of a syntactic holon at text level

In text production, such syntactic holons can be used to place emphasis on a particular subject (in the Project Ptolemy text, the emphasis is on the *project* itself) and to create a clear style. There are many other syntactic combinations which would result in the creation of diversified syntactic holons at text level. Another example is the creation of a text using O + V + S holons. Such holons, which are characterised by the use of passive voice, place focus on the object, instead of the real subject. Based on this type of holon, the text would read:

> Techniques supporting heterogeneous modeling, including both formal "meta-models" and a software laboratory for experimenting with heterogeneous modeling are aimed to be developed by the project. In this context, methods based on dataflow and process networks, discrete-event systems, synchronous/reactive languages, finite-state machines, and communicating sequential processes will be explored. Contributions ranging from fundamental semantics to synthesis of embedded software and custom hardware will be made.

3.2. Production of semantic relations

Semantic relations can be established at text level using a Theme-Rheme analysis. A relational analysis at text level between Themes or between Rhemes reveals existing meaning and structural relations at text level and shows the way subsequent discourse re-uses previous Themes or Rhemes according to an overall textual plan. Daneš (1974) was the first to use the term *thematic progression* to show how Themes and Rhemes are organized together in an ordered and hierarchic way. Daněs developed a model of thematic progression and he observed different patterns of matching sentence arrangements: *linear progression* (the Rheme of a sentence becomes the Theme of the immediately succeeding sentence, as in the following extract), *progression with constant Theme* (the same Theme is repeated at the beginning of each sentence), and *progression with derived Theme* (subsequent Themes are derived from a superordinate item at the beginning of a text). As it can be seen in the following representation, the Ptolemy Project is based on progression with constant Theme:

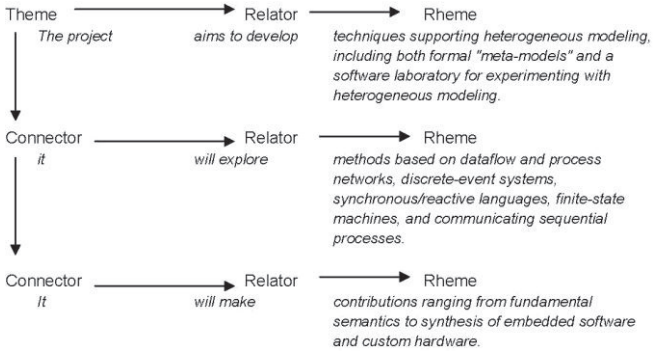

Figure 2. Exemplification of thematic progression at text level

Figure 3 presents other examples of thematic progression which could be decided upon in the pre-writing stage of text production. These different types of progression are specific for different text types and for different writing purposes (linear progression for narrative texts, progression with constant Theme for argumentative texts, progression with derived Theme for descriptive texts, etc.):

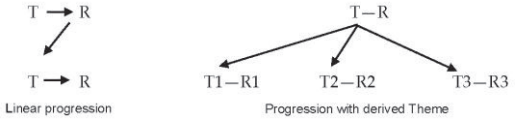

Figure 3. Thematic progressions

3.3. Creation of lexical and grammatical holons

A lexico-grammatical relational analysis at text level reveals the text producer's preference for a particular wording. For instance, the lexical relation between all the subjects in the Project Ptolemy example displays the following textual preference, presented in Figure 4 in the form of a lexico-grammatical holon of the type *noun-pronoun-pronoun*:

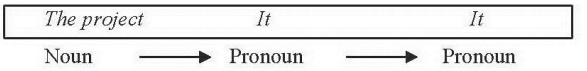

Figure 4. Exemplification of a lexical and grammatical holon at text level

Such holons may also be created the pre-writing stage of text production and may display limited or complex variation at text level, e.g. *noun-noun-noun, noun-demonstrative pronoun-noun, noun-demonstrative pronoun-demonstrative pronoun*, *etc*. This variation at the level of the holon enables the text producer to achieve the desired stylistic effect and to preserve cohesion at text level.

3.4. Creation of information frames

Sociologists and psychologists have shown that people organize and store their knowledge of the world as fixed data structures, one such form being the *frame* (Goffman, 1974), which gathers typical individuals, actions and activities, i.e. constituents in general, in a situation. Possible examples of frames are *university-frame, car-frame, computer frame,* etc. These frames are static representations showing *what* constituents are associated. As for *how* these constituents are associated, frames are seen as being made up as recognizable structures of relevancies. *What* and *how* constituents are associated in a frame is accounted for cognitively, based on each individual's knowledge background. In the specialized literature there are models for the identification and analysis of frames and frame elements (Dejica, 2010). Using the suggested model for frame identification and analysis (Dejica, 2010) on the Ptolemy Project example, the following cognitive image of the text can be created:

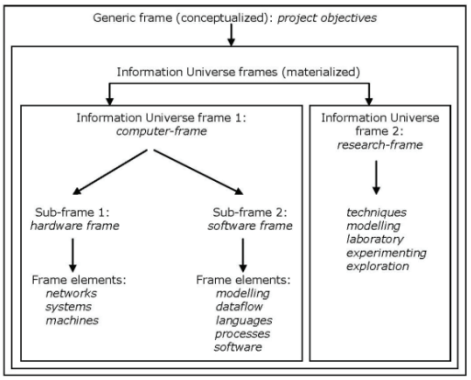

Figure 5. Frame representation at text level

However, I am not aware of the existence of models to be used in the text-production stage, and I believe that research in this direction could be beneficial for the academic community and students, as well. Such models would have to display the cognitive-relational image of the text and would have to be developed in a similar way to the process of brainstorming for ideas, the only difference being that in this case brainstorming would focus on identifying the key elements, the *must-have* words, the information units necessary to be included in the text to achieve the desired effect of information load. Also, when creating the frame, language for specific or general purposes could be used, in a similar way in which texts may be translated to suit different types of audience (Dejica, 2010).

4. Conclusion

The suggested approach to text production presented in this paper builds on existing approaches to test analysis. It consists of the creation of several relational structures (syntactic holon, thematic progression, lexico-grammatical holon, and information frame) from various linguistic perspectives (syntactic, semantic, lexico-grammatical and cognitive) in the pre-writing stage of the text production process. The approach is intended to complement existing text-production strategies and should not be regarded as the only way in which texts can be produced or organized.

Its novelty resides in the fact that when used in an integrated manner, it facilitates text-production, it raises students' awareness of the fact that texts can be created to suit various purposes, and it contributes to the development of text-production competence by showing how salient textual properties can be used consistently, how relevant textual information can be stressed or focused, how different discourse styles can be achieved, and how cohesion and coherence can be preserved so as to facilitate text reading and understanding.

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